

BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH
COMMAND SERGEANT MAJOR JEFF MELLINGER,
COMMAND SERGEANT MAJOR FOR MULTINATIONAL FORCE IRAQ
HEADQUARTERS

LOCATION: VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM BAGHDAD, IRAQ

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THIS IS A RUSH TRANSCRIPT.

CSM. MELLINGER: Well, okay. Well, this is Command Sergeant Major Jeff Mellinger. I'm the command sergeant major for multinational force Iraq headquarters here in Baghdad, and I guess we're on with -- I'm not sure who else is on the line here, but kind of open it up to questions and so forth, and I'll be happy to answer the questions that I can, and we'll talk about how things are going in Iraq, and the mission, troops, and whatever else may be of interest to whoever is out there or calls in. And, with that, I think let's just get started.

MODERATOR: Okay. Well, Charlie, do you want to kick off?

Q Sure. Sergeant Major, my readers at Whizban (ph) are interested in knowing what they can do on the home front to help the enlisted troops who are over in Iraq right now. What are the things that have been successful on the homefront to help them that we might be able to --

CSM MELLINGER: Well, sir, you know, one thing that there's never been any doubt about here is that there's a great deal of support you say for the enlisted members, but that's for everybody that's deployed over here. And I'm sure the same holds true in Afghanistan and a hundred other places where we have our warriors around the world.

The support of people back home has never wavered, and it hasn't slowed down. Every week I get care packages from people I haven't got any idea who they are, but they know somebody that knew somebody that talked to somebody that gave them an address. And so it goes. And it's just overwhelming, quite honestly, the amount of support and encouragement we get from the average people, the friends and neighbors and so forth back home. So I think at times it really does become overwhelming. You get so much stuff you just don't know how to say thanks. And when you see a cardboard box full of -- or hand-drawn notes from Mrs. Brown's third grade class in some school far away, it's really -- it's humbling as well, because after all we do what we do for everybody back home -- not for ourselves.

Q Are there any particular organized programs that we should publicize? Any particular programs that are more effective than ours? Or just general?

CSM MELLINGER: Well, I think -- you know, there was a young soldier several years ago that started a program of anysoldier.com, which has been very successful. There's so many. We have organizations that work to offer anything you can imagine, quite literally. So I'd just say any kind of support in any fashion. And it doesn't have to be here in Iraq or sent to Iraq or Afghanistan, but that support back at home and the things that go on all over just to say thanks.

You know, I was traveling through an airport back in the States not long ago, and an elderly woman came up and apologized for bothering me, but she just wanted to say thanks. And she felt kind of awkward, it seemed to me, but I don't think any of us take that lightly. We certainly don't take it for granted. And I personally appreciate any acknowledgment, but that's not why we get up in the morning. We're proud to do what we do, and I just -- anything you can do to make the U.S. a better place, keep after it, and any time you get an opportunity to say thanks to a soldier, sailor, airman, Marine, Coast Guardsman, our great civilian work force, Department of Defense, Department of Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, civilians. And, you know, people are doing just ordinary things back there to help make the country a better place.

Q Thank you.

Q Command Sergeant Major, this is Mark Finkelstein from NewsBusters.org. I was reading your biography and, if I am not mistaken, exactly one week from today you will be celebrating 35 years of service. I wonder if I could just get you to reflect back on that. Did you ever imagine when you were a young draftee in 1972 that you would be a command sergeant major one day? And what would be your words to a young man or woman who is considering becoming a member of the United States military?

CSM MELLINGER: Well, as you gathered, you're quite correct: next week on the 18th I will complete 35 years of active duty. And to answer your question, I had no inkling that I would ever get past private -- not in those days. It wasn't that I was a bad soldier, it's just you're doing all you can do to just survive and be the best you can be. At where you are it's sometimes hard to see past that. And it's not until you get a little bit further on in your career and you've had some successes and you get some perspective, that you're able to speculate, "Wow, maybe I can make sergeant. And, wow, if I work really hard maybe they'll give me a squad. And never in my wildest dream did I think that I could ever become the senior enlisted person for a coalition operation that's involved in trying to create a democratic society out of one that was in just absolute chaos.

And my advice to any young person out there is: set some goals and go after them, whether that's in the military or in civilian life. You know, you've got to have realistic, attainable goals, and don't let anybody or anything deter you from them. And as long as they're honorable and respectable goals and you keep working at them and don't lose your sights and don't get distracted, you'll be successful. And if you're going to go into the military, I think it's just a fabulous opportunity to, more than any other facet of society I can think of, the U.S. military offers you an opportunity to be literally anything you want to be -- because your only restrictions are yourself. If you work hard and persevere and do the things you need to do to be successful, on somebody's timetable, not necessarily yours, you'll be successful. I'm living proof of that.

Q I wonder if I could just quickly follow up. I live in a college town. I come into contact with a lot of college students, and very often I ask them, "Well, if you support the war, have you considered service?" And frequently I get an answer along the lines, "Well, I feel I can serve in some other ways," or "The sorts of needs that the military have don't really relate to my areas of strength or expertise." What would you say to them?

CSM MELLINGER: Well, I will tell you that they're, number one, misinformed, that the military has got some of everything that you will find in the civilian world. And I think if you go look at some of those Fortune 500 companies and look at what they ask for in their senior leaders, you compare that with a resume from someone who's served in the military, you'll find out there's a great deal in common -- a lot more than people know. There's a lot of civilian corporations that actively and aggressively seek out former military members, because they understand that they grow up in a culture that demands excellence and dedication and motivation and perseverance and adherence to standards and goals and so forth. This is very much an organization that supports those

kinds of things. And when you look around, it's -- this isn't all about what people may have as the typical day in the military. We've got doctors and scientists -- you know, you talk about doctors -- a lot of advances in the civilian world come from military medicine.

Q Thank you. And I know all of us congratulate and commend you on your 35 years of service. Thank you.

CSM MELLINGER: Well, thank you. It's a privilege to serve.

MODERATOR: Did someone else join the call a few minutes back?

CSM MELLINGER: I don't know, sir. From my end I can hear beeps every now and then, so I --

MODERATOR: I heard a pick up and then a drop off.

Actually, if you allow me to switch hats and to -- I also work with American Forces Press Service. I was curious if you have an update on what sort of security operations are going on in the provinces. We hear an awful lot about Baghdad. And I know from the political side they're waiting on the government of Iraq to announce some legislation to allow provincial elections to go forward. But from the security perspective, is it business like usual out there, or some sort of specialized operations outside of Anbar?

CSM MELLINGER: Well, there are 18 provinces in Iraq, and as you may or may not know there is varying degrees of progress, if you will, or security, in different parts of the country. There are regions in this country where there's virtually minimal levels of violence and where a great deal of success is being made in progress towards a free democratic type of society, representative government, where services are working in a pretty fair fashion. So, yes, you go down to some of the southern provinces we've already done provincial Iraqi control, and we have al Muthanna Province, for example, which we've turned over to Iraqi control several months ago, is doing quite well. There are others that are still struggling. Baghdad you mentioned -- Baghdad -- and of course the preponderance of the population is in the Baghdad Province, and that's where we find ourselves with the biggest troubles right now. But as we work our way around the country -- Al Anbar, you mentioned -- it's got a lot of notoriety because of a couple of towns out there, Fallujah and Ramadi, where we've had some pretty fierce battles over time. But what doesn't get as much press is there's a certain level of -- or I should say they've reached a point out there in Anbar Province where a number of sheiks have gotten together and said enough is enough -- let's quite standing by and watching and get to participating in some resolution. And they've actually gotten together to try and throw out al Qaeda, and they're having some success in that regard. And the real gist of it is they've had enough and they've decided that they've got to become part of the solution. The province of Diyala is still having some difficulties, but they're doing pretty well up there with the police and the army and getting in and making a difference in those towns and providing a safe and secure environment is not an easy thing to do. We have

neighborhoods in our own country where people don't feel good walking outside at night. It takes time to build capacity in each of these areas.

Get up in Erbil, Dohuk, Nineveh Provinces, we've got a great deal of success up in those areas with local government and the police and the army running their own operations in many of those areas with us and the coalition in oversight. So each one has got its own unique challenges and successes and setbacks, and we just keep working through each of them as we can.

Q Master Sergeant, what's your favorite way of getting around Iraq? How do people travel from place to place and you travel from place to place?

CSM MELLINGER: (Laughs.) You say "favorite" way of getting around. I travel in humvees, and I'm not sure if that's favorite, or if that's just how it is. But most of the travel in this country is done in, you know, as far as what you might call commuting, going from major city to major city or from base to base. Most of that for people that work here is probably done via aircraft. But the day-to-day business of fighting an insurgency and moving supplies and people and so forth, you know as far as personnel is concerned, is still getting around in our combat vehicles. And that means moving around on the ground. You can't establish safety and security from the air and from afar. It's got to be up close and personal, and it's really how we do what we do here.

Q And what's the best length of deployment do you feel for enlisted men? Six months or 12 months or 18?

CSM MELLINGER: Wow, there's a tough question right there. What's the perfect deployment length? There's a lot of arguments, and I don't know that anybody would ever agree on what that is. A shorter deployment length makes for fewer issues with long separations and so forth, but it also takes away from your ability to provide continuity. You know, it takes you a while to learn the area that you're operating in. And a while could be a couple of months; it could be three, four, five months. And if you have a six-month deployment, for example, and it takes you three or four months to learn -- you know, it's kind of like analogous to getting a new job. You may be absolutely qualified on paper for doing that work, but I think you'd agree that your first couple of weeks you're still trying to find your way around the building, you don't know who to talk to, you don't know what everybody's capabilities and limitations are. So until you get all that sorted out, you really aren't as effective and efficient as you could be had you been there longer. And once you've been in that position or that capacity for six, eight, ten months or a year, you're very comfortable -- you know all the ins and outs, you know who's new, who's not, what the personalities are, what they bring to the table, what they don't. It's the same thing here. So when you start talking about what we're doing here -- in a counterinsurgency, you absolutely have got to be involved with people, and people is personalities, people is strengths and weaknesses. You don't learn that on short tours. It takes time and it takes an investment, a personal investment, getting out and meeting people, talking to them day after day, finding out what their needs and expectations and desires and goals and so forth are.

So I think you know as hard to be -- or hard to swallow or understand as it might be, longer deployments really, for the type of work we're doing, are far better than short ones. That's not a very popular thing, because that means soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines are gone from their families, their loved ones, their jobs and everything else for a longer period of time, but this isn't a fist fight. This is a marathon or a relay race, if you will, where you've got to carry this thing a long, long time. It can't be done in quick spurts. It's got to be over time, and that takes a commitment of time.

Q Excellent.

CSM MELLINGER: Well, I successfully danced all around that, didn't I?

Q Yeah, great.

CSM MELLINGER: But it is important that we are committed a time. You know, I've been here for a long time myself. And, you know, General Casey, my previous boss, was here for a long time, and we've got soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines coming back for a second year, for a third year, and they understand the importance of what we're doing. And you don't hear a whole lot of noise about being here for a year or being here for nine months or being here for 15 months. It's -- people just want to know how long they're going to be so they can make some plans. And I think at the end of the day the more stability we have, the more that we have people staying long term, the more successful we are in establishing the relationships and gleaning the insights that are required to get ahead in the counterinsurgency fight.

Q My readers have somewhat of a sense of humor. They asked me to ask you which part of a Peep you eat first.

CSM MELLINGER: Which part of a Peep do I eat first? Well, there's somebody in on the inside that knows that I even like Peeps. But, you know, I'll just tell you go for the head. (Laughter.) I didn't know we had Peep technique here, but that's pretty funny. Now I have to go backtrack, figure out who even knows I eat those little things.

Q All right, one of my readers.

Q I have another question, unless somebody else hasn't had a chance.

MODERATOR: Feel free.

Q Okay. Command Sergeant Major, it's Mark Finkelstein again. There are various proposals back at home as to how our troops might be redeployed, various strategies. And one that I have heard, and I'm sure our other people here today have as well, is that our troops should not be used to try to quell sectarian strife and should only devote themselves to dealing with al Qaeda in Iraq and other outside forces. Do you -- if I can put you on the spot a little bit, as a military matter is that practical? I mean, can you

say, "Well, we're within the country, but we're only going to pursue this mission and not that mission"? And, you know, how would people possibly go about carrying out those sort of orders?

CSM MELLINGER: Well, number one, it would be impossible. That would be like asking the Chicago police to never mind the gang warfare -- just go after burglars. Back -- you know, think back when Al Capone and his guys were running things in town. "Never mind gang warfare, we're just going to stick with the average street crime." How do you know what you're looking at? Right is right, wrong is wrong. When you see things that are wrong, you've got to deal with them, and that's what we have to continue to do here.

To those that would say something like that, that would be proposing that we stand by and watch another Bosnia and do nothing, to watch another Kosovo and do nothing, watch another Rwanda and do nothing. I don't know how we cannot do that. When you ask me as a soldier, you've got to give me a mission and then get out of the way. And if the mission is to provide safety and security in Iraq, then that means we stop bank robbers, we stop burglars, we stop murderers, we stop thieves, and we stop black marketeers, we stop insurgents -- al Qaeda or otherwise. We can't differentiate or delineate, because safe is safe and there's no in between there. And how we go about doing that is a whole different matter. And, as you know, we're working very hard to allow the Iraqi army units and Iraqi police units to get in and do their work and to do that as much as they can without our assistance. And when they need our assistance, we deliver it just as quickly as we can, and as effectively as we can, so that once again as soon as that incident can be brought under control we're trying to back out of the picture again to allow the Iraqi government, police, army and so forth to get in and be the ones to do it as much as they can. We're having a great deal of success in some areas of the country with that, and unit by unit that ability to conduct combat operations unaided by us varies, and there aren't very many units, quite frankly, that can do it without us at all, but there's more and more of them that can do it with not very much help from us whatsoever.

Q Thank you very much. I appreciate the response.

CSM MELLINGER: Certainly. I've got about three more minutes here and then we're going to get cut off. So I'd be happy to try and answer any more questions that we have out there.

MODERATOR: If we're good, Command Sergeant Major, if you have anything you'd like to say in closing?

CSM MELLINGER: Well, I'd just tell you that I appreciate, first, that the questions that we got, and I don't think anybody here minds hard questions, because the more we get an opportunity to tell you what it is we're doing and why we think it's important, the more you'll have available to you as you discuss things.

Now, soldiers try real hard not to get involved in the politics. You can't do politics and be a soldier at the same time. It's just a little too confusing -- well, "confusing" is not the right word, but you know we've got to stay focused on our mission. And I think that the support that we get from the public -- and you hear a lot of negative things in the news and so forth, but the overwhelming majority of things that we hear and the things that we see support the military, and we're very thankful for that support and understanding and appreciative of any and all kinds of indicators of that, whether it's cards from Mrs. Smith's third grade class or the box full of goodies. But, at the end of the day, we are committed to this mission here. We believe in what we're doing, and I know you can go find somebody that disagrees with everything I've said today, but I believe what I've said, and I'm committed to it.

And for those that think we ought to leave tomorrow or the next day, I would just tell them that it took us 14 years to get our own Constitution ratified -- 14 years in a country that wasn't at war internally. This country over here did it in less than a year. And the Iraqi people deserve an opportunity to live in safety and security, and we've committed to them that we're going to provide that opportunity. We need to stay and see it through. And who knows when that's going to be, but nothing easy is done overnight, and there's nothing in this part of the world that's easy.

So I thank you for the opportunity to talk, hope to talk to you another day, and thank you very much.

Q Thank you.

MODERATOR: Thank you.

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